

My Reflection- Gwen Melhado

What has been the journey?

A Shift. As is written in Ecclesiastes Chapter 3:1 “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens...” as you know the unprecedented COVID pandemic gave rise to a paradigm shift with significant impacts on people worldwide. A structure in a congregation, such as a General Chapter was not immune to this great shift. As such, our General Chapter moved from its customary in-person 4-year cycle and extended it a year. Hence, the Chapter was conducted summer of 2021 on Zoom platform, instead of 2020. I am sure you can recall how that was played out... During the Chapter, I was one among four... elected to Congregational Leadership as councilor. At that time and thereafter, we continued to live in separate locations...I lived in Jamaica, and travel was restricted for all.

Bearing in mind our Chapter theme, “Behold, I Am Doing Something New, Listen!” I began the journey with much enthusiasm, hope, and some public health constraints. Some constraints... the congregation could not have assemblies because gatherings were limited in number. For safety purposes, I feared moving in and out in others space as I believe it was best for us to remain in our own space and work remotely because COVID was a looming threat to public health. We began our work from a distance, and Zoom soon became a trusted-working companion for me. Our first in-person meeting was in January 2022, and we met with Ted Dunn whom we had previously contacted to work with us while we were still grappling with what we would like for our congregation. All four of us had heart-to-heart conversations about our individual experiences in community; we expressed concerns for sisters who were not free in having open, honest, and in-depth conversations with each other and wondered what breakthroughs might make this possible, and how we would move forward with our Chapter Directives. The opening statement of our Chapter Directives soon grabbed our attention because it communicates a familiar message on transformation which aligns and forms the gateway to our Franciscan way of life.

The word Transformation was not just a “buzzword” for us. You, Sisters, expressed a deep desire to explore the topic because the word Transformation surfaced as a popular agenda item to be carried through the Chapter... eventually, it was not chosen as a “stand alone” topic. Instead, it was captured under a broader heading which is woven into our opening statement of our Chapter Directives. “Rooted in

our Franciscan-Clarian Charism and Mission and led by the Holy Spirit to interior conversion and life-long transformation, we must respond to new realities in our world today as prophetic witnesses by living and serving in relationship with one another, our sisters and brothers and all of creation.” Transformation has been a yearning for many congregations and we, FSAs, wanted to be a part of that collective yearning. We have voiced a desire for deep change that would make greater impact on our lives together... to move toward something new. And we used Ted’s articles on Transformation as part of our Chapter preparation and found them especially useful. Everyone is working on this topic including LCWR, USIG, and the wider Church community. To this end, further conversations with Ted led us to hire both Ted and Beth Dunn for the CARE process to drive our Transformation Journey. Beth and Ted were straightforward in letting us know that they work as a team...and that the process would be time-consuming and demanding.

Why CARE? Leadership agreed to explore a different approach to engage you, our Sisters, as an investment in our own personal, spiritual, and social development. When we introduced CARE as the vehicle to drive our Journey of Transformation, I heard some resistance, challenges, and struggles that you, Sisters, shared. Some of you said CARE would interfere with your work schedule; some of you were excited and willing because you wanted something different and meaningful and thankfully, you decided to take on leadership roles as facilitators in CARE; a few of you had concerns about your health; others of you wondered about the cost that may be incurred- financially, emotionally and in our calendars, while some of you thought it would not make a difference in your lives because the process would not last and you were too old to change. With all the hopes and reservations, we expressed, we took a leap of faith and went all in.

When we began CARE, I had the opportunity to travel and meet you, Sisters, in your respective countries and areas, except for New Jersey. On the journey, I experienced situations in which transformation happened. Just to name a few instances, some of you shared experiences you did not share before; those of you who thought you would not participate because you were too old to change... benefitted whole-heartedly and to this day, you are using CARE skills; and, in disclosures, many of us are able to strengthen our safety with one another, deepen our trust and are willing to share authentically by being vulnerable with one another.

More personally, in previous experiences in community there have been times when I felt unheard, discounted, and unnoticed in conversations which caused me to wonder if my contribution was useless or had no meaning. Being introduced to CARE by Ted and Beth, I gained an invaluable experience so, I made a commitment to the training approach because I wanted to change that perspective and reclaim my inner voice. I willingly participated in the facilitators' training and agreed to travel and assist in the training across the congregation. Now, I am finding my voice. I refuse to be discounted. I am committed to being more visible because I want to be a valuable contributor to our community, and I want the same for every one of us.

Despite the challenges of frequent travel, frequent absence from home and conflicts with appointments, my overall experience of CARE has been very rewarding. I learned conversational skills that provide an avenue for in-depth conversations going forward. There are times when I draw upon CARE skills, especially in important conversations when tensions are high, and much is at stake for us in community life. And there are times when I realize that I have not used the skills and I want to go back to the person in an effort to redo the conversation using the skills... and I am learning to appreciate when people do that with me.

CARE provided me the opportunity to interact on a deeper level, getting to know you better, realizing that we are more alike than different regardless of our geographic boundaries, our various languages, and cultures. Having had the experience of travelling...being with and learning together with you, Sisters, allowed me to enter more deeply into the lives of more Sisters and some of our associates and lay partners in mission.

Bottom line: for me,

- CARE is an excellent means for us to learn and have more honest and meaningful conversations. We are finding our voice, and we are growing!

In addition to CARE, from my perspective, we have addressed some big issues in the last three years, some of these are:

- Introduction and implementation of a different Leadership model (with two sisters and two lay women) in Jamaica along with our continuation of the FSAJ Ltd.

- Closing of St. Elizabeth Convent in Tampa and continued discernment around the entire Perry Avenue Properties.
- Repurposing of our Motherhouse and forging partnership with Home Health Care and Hospice.
- The sale of property where our old Motherhouse stood for the construction of the Allegany Emergency Medical Transport (EMT) and Rescue Service for the civic community.
- Addressing issues among our Sponsored Ministries: Canticle Farm, Franciscan Center, The Dwelling Place, St. Elizabeth's Mission Society and Renodin Foundation and helping them to become independent of our management as much as possible.
- Forged a Journey of Transformation with CARE as the vehicle for engaging the entire congregation, including some associates and lay partners in mission. And Leadership participated in the training as equals among you, our Sisters.
- Outsourced professional expertise to assist us to frame our future.
- Making intentional efforts to educate some laity who are ministering with us through the Padua Program in areas of leadership and our Franciscan charism.

I have a lot of hopes as we begin to shape our future together. Here are just a few:

- I hope we continue to integrate the CARE skills and keep CARE alive in our conversations to change our perspective in relationship with each other.
- I hope we continue to invite, collaborate, encourage, and support the laity to take on responsibilities that, we, FSAs initially held...especially the collaborative relationships that exist among our sponsored ministries, our schools and college, our properties, and other administrative roles... for instance the Leadership model in Jamaica, the repurposing of the convent and following on with FSAJ Ltd. And the repurposing of our Motherhouse with Home Health Care and Hospice.
- I hope we continue to share deeper aspects of our lives with our associates and partners in mission to further our mission and charism.
- I hope we will continue our commitment to our Chapter Directives because we have just begun.

Question: These are some of my hopes for our future. What are yours?